What a Tale for Stevenson to Have Told!

By BRIAN HOOKER.

ONCE in a blue moon some work appears whose interest is far less for itself than for the comparison which it affords with some classic already recognized. Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, for example, will hardly of itself astound the world; but in comparison with *Antony and Cleopatra* and with *Julius Caesar* it serves to illuminate the contrasted art of Shaw and Shakespeare and to set off against each other the Elizabethan drama and our own.

Similarly Mr. Clifford S. Raymond's new novel, *The Mystery of Hartley House*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, $1.40), is in itself only a somewhat better than average tale of the type suggested by its title. But its theme happens to be precisely that of *The Master of Ballantrae*: each is a story of the hate between two brothers. And in structure and treatment, furthermore, the later book is perfectly the complement of Stevenson's, being everywhere strongest where he is weak and weaker where he is strong.

Whether by fortunate accident or by design, the comparison of the two offers an interesting object lesson in the art of fiction; for it illustrates as from the inside not only how Stevenson made a great novel, but how he might have made it greater.

Stevenson's Two Strands.

The story of *The Master of Ballantrae* one may take for granted; and its great qualities of style and character and analysis of human nature are no less well and widely known. But as against these obvious and familiar merits there are faults hardly less universally felt, although less fully understood. The story separates as it were in two veins or strata diverse in tone and not even entirely appropriate to each other, like beads of two colors strung at random along a single thread. It is dramatic and melodramatic by turns, a serious tragedy of character and a wild yarn of picturesque adventure.

The two strains mix but will not combine. And nearly every reader feels that the tragic portions of the tale are not only better worth doing than the merely adventurous, but very much better done. The final scene, for instance, where the Master is resuscitated from his grave, comes with a sense of disappointment: it ought somehow to be more sensational than it is; and the most uncritical admirer cannot but find it inferior to the first return of the Master from abroad or the great duel at the House of Durrisdeer.

Story, Structure, Telling.

Now, there are in any work of fiction three several elements which it is often convenient to distinguish. First, the story itself, that sequence of events which constitute the subject matter of the tale, as we imagine them actually to have occurred. Second, the structure, the particular form in which these events are selected and proportioned and arranged by the author for the purpose of the particular work in question. Third, the execution, the sheer writing, the manner in which the tale is told in words and set down on paper.

What we loosely call the plot usually means the combination of the first two: the material story already arranged for presentation. The distinction between the two appears very plainly in the ordinary detective story, or in such a play as *On Trial*, where the story is inverted in construction so as to be told backward from the end to the beginning; whereas the actual events are of course supposed to have taken place in chronological order. The third element, that of sheer writing, is easily enough distinguished.

Still further to clarify this analysis, consider it for a moment as from the author's point of view. He has three several things to accomplish: To find or imagine a good story, a striking series of events; to arrange this material effectively, selecting some scenes and characters for special emphasis, omitting or subordinating others, and deciding in what order the events are to be told; and finally, to write the book.

"Hartley House."

The actual story told in *The Mystery of Hartley House* is thus conceived: Richard and Arthur Dobson fell heirs to the family estate upon the banks of the Hudson not far from Ossining. Richard, the elder brother, was a brute and bully, cruel as a child and in maturity a profligate. Arthur, by nature genial and gentle, was from childhood the butt of his malice and the object of his abuse.

The enmity between the two culminated in a fight at midnight upon the river bank, in which Arthur was smitten senseless. Recovering, he contrived to disappear in such a manner as to leave evidence that Richard had murdered him and thrown his body into the stream.

Richard was sentenced to life imprisonment. Arthur meanwhile, living abroad under another name, made friends and fortune and a happy marriage. He developed into a man strong and wise and lovable, whose whole life was yet sustained upon the contemplation of secret and triumphant revenge.

After the lapse of years had left him safe from recognition he returned to buy the family house and settle down there upon the scene of his remembered wrongs and close to the prison in which his brother was confined. His identity was known to his wife; to his servant, Jed, a man cultured and ambitious beyond his place, torn between loyalty to his master and a vain passion for the daughter of the house; and in part, by suspicions and inklings, to sundry outsiders. To keep the secret, therefore, became a complex and continual struggle; while Arthur lived only to complete a triumph which every day increased, every enjoyment enhanced by contrast and every benevolence justified.

At length the mind of Richard became enfeebled by imprisonment. The two old men met; and Arthur, secure in the knowledge that nothing his enemy might say would be believed, revealed himself and triumphed over him. Then, having perfected his whole desire of life, he died happy and well beloved.

"The Master of Ballantrae."

Compare this with the actual story of *The Master of Ballantrae*. The theme is of course the same. And in every point but one Mr. Raymond's material is quite evidently superior. The exception is of course the figure of the Master himself, since the parallel figure of Richard, cut off from action by imprisonment throughout the major portion of the tale, affords no such opportunity for development as a character. Otherwise, point by point, Stevenson has all the worst of it.

The character of Mr. Henry, the man ungracefully virtuous who cannot but seem to put himself in the wrong, and his conventional degeneration under the influence of his own anger, cannot compare as an imaginative creation with Arthur Dobson, the study of a soul nourished and strengthened upon revenge, and for the perfection and justifying of his triumph bringing forth out of that evil soil the flowers of culture and the fruits of kindliness. The rather neutral personality of Lady Anne is of far less dramatic value than her counterpart, the Christian wife loathing her husband's crime yet abetting it out of sheer love and understanding. The servant, Jed, moreover, with his tragedy of misplaced refinement, the frustrate hedonist of rich desires, utterly unscrupulous and selfish except for his one scruple of loyalty, is a human conception beside which poor old Mackellar shrinks insignificant.

And yet the chief superiority is not in the characters but in the plot. There is no need of detailed comment to point out how much firmer and more logically knit is Mr. Raymond's story, how much more concentrated upon its theme, how much richer in dramatic situation and in opportunities for sensation and suspense. It is here alone that Stevenson really fails. Of his characters, one is actually great and the others by sheer truth and vividness of delineation are removed far above failure. But his plot is confused between tragedy and adventure, between human nature and sensationalism. A great part of it is merely extraneous. The adventures with Teach the Pirate, the episodes in the tropics and in India, as related by the Chevalier Burke, have nothing to do with the hate between two brothers. They have no logical connection with the tale; and to say that they contribute something to the character of the Master is not much more than an excuse.

Where Stevenson Excels

Thus far we have been speaking by no means of the two books in their completed form but only of the first element in each, the element of the actual story as originally conceived: of conception, not of embodiment, of the potential merit of each tale, not of the degree in which these potentialities are achieved. The moment we begin to compare the further elements of structure and execution the superiorities of *The Mystery of Hartley House* abruptly and entirely cease.

Mr. Raymond has imagined a better story than Stevenson's; but it is no disparagement to him that he has neither constructed it as soundly nor written it as well. In a sense the very comparison is unfair; since he has made no attempt to realize the tragic possibilities of his material. He has chosen to construct his tale upon the ordinary formula of the mystery story, deriving its chief interest from the gradual disclosure of the situation and from the artificial suspense thus produced. Accordingly, he begins the story toward the end, when Arthur Dobson is already an old man, living at Hartley House under an assumed name, and beset with difficulties in the keeping of his secret. The bulk of the book is taken up with the details of his precarious tenure of revenge; its climax and catastrophe combine in the disclosure of his true identity; and the entire human tragedy of fraternal hatred wherein the greatness of the actual story principally resides is thus thrown into an antecedent action to be briefly and baldly explained in the last few pages.

How Stevenson Wrote.

Having imagined a potentially great novel, Mr. Raymond chose modestly to make of it no more than a good honest mystery story. Stevenson, having conceived a wild tale of adventurous romance, did not choose at all: he followed where his own first fancy led him, and so made by dint of sheer genius and skilful craftsmanship a novel partly great. We are so fortunate as to have his own account of the process.

He intended from the beginning a tale of moving incident, of many years and of many lands; the burial and revival of the Master, last and grimmest in design of a series of reappearances, was actually the first episode to be concretely invented; and it was only later on that all this episodic material was motivated and impassioned by linking it up with the tragic situation in the House of Durrisdeer. Thus he set out to write, not a tragedy of the hate between two brothers but a sort of sinister melodrama, which grew under his hand into a finer and more human thing.

The Chevalier Burke and his narrative, the lurid and exotic scenes of piracy and the Orient and the American wilderness, belong of right to a work of different type and tone from that of the completed book. That Stevenson retained them even as incongruous and outgrown members of the final structure is due to two plain reasons. They were part of the original design, of the actual story with which he began; and as such, he took them for granted in the subsequent work of construction and execution. Early and vividly imagined, they had assumed to his mind the color of authentic facts; he really forgot to regard them as fictions of his own making, which he might wisely alter or expunge. Again, these inappropriate incidents were precisely that sort of violent and picturesque adventure which Stevenson loved, but which (comparatively speaking) he could never write. It did not, as Alan Breck would say, set his genius. But Stevenson, unlike Alan, was not the man to take his own genius seriously. He neither understood its nature nor appreciated its importance.

Morality in Motion.

The great power of Stevenson was for character. And character as he saw it meant the embodiment of morals and of motives. Action, which he so loved for its own sake, took on inevitably the national and natural complexion of his mind, and came through upon his pages as morality in motion.

He stands alone as the man who gave a conscience to adventure, who made the dry staff of the Shorter Catechism burst into burning blossoms of romance. From *The Dynamiter* to *Dr. Jekyll*, from *Hermiston* to *Treasure Island* his diverse work is one in spirit, a homily of howling melodrama. And the defects of his qualities appear when the spirit fails to fit the substance, when the adventure becomes incongruous with the humanity.

The Master of Ballantrae shows him within the compass of a single volume at his worst and best. It is a classic, of course, with all its imperfections. But it is interesting to imagine what greater thing Stevenson might have made if he had chanced upon *The Mystery of Hartley House* on that cold night when he went out to seek a story under the stars.